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Subversive Humor and the Critique of Imperial Hubris in Prophetic Texts

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»Biblical humor has a prophetic dimension. It works subversively in order to constitute congruity to a former imbalanced situation, thus revealing an alternative reality«.¹ This introductory description of an encyclopedia article on humor in the Hebrew Bible succinctly addresses three aspects that will be the focus of the present article: it explores *humor* as a rhetorical and literary device utilized in *prophetic texts* to fulfill a *subversive function*. The subversive nature arises from a critical engagement with foreign empires and their rulers, who are frequently accused of hubris. This is where the »alternative reality« comes into play: by employing humor, these texts question and challenge the rulers' claim to imperial power, providing a counter-narrative to imperial propaganda. Consequently, imperial power and its (supposed) hubris become an intriguing target for humor. Conversely, humor emerges as a fascinating strategy for criticizing and deconstructing imperial hubris. The aim of this article is to analyze both the literary and rhetorical use of humorous techniques in prophetic texts addressing foreign empires and to determine their effects and functions. In other words, how and why is humor employed in these texts, and how does humor work in opposition to imperial powers?

1 Terminological Clarifications

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify two central terms used in the title. Firstly, the term »hubris« requires explanation. With regard to the Hebrew Bible, I define *hubris* as *a self-assessment or an ambition that exceeds what is justified and*

¹ Erasmus Gaß, »Humor and Wit I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament,« *EBR* 12 (2016) 564–567: 564 f.

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appropriate.² This appropriate measure can be a divinely established boundary or even the distinction between the divine and the human; however, the term does not need to be limited to this religious-theological aspect.³ Rather, this broad definition has the advantage of encompassing a wide range of conceptions of pride and arrogance found in the Hebrew Bible. However, it nevertheless often includes religious and/or ethical dimensions: hubris can be portrayed as repugnant to YHWH, provoke divine intervention, or coincide with ethically reprehensible behavior.

It is important to emphasize that depictions of hubris are a matter of interpretation and perspective. It is not an objective category; rather, the texts portray and construct certain human attitudes or behaviors as hubristic. If hubris signifies that which goes beyond what is justified and appropriate, it is clear that such assessments are subject to cultural differences and historical changes, affecting how the boundary of the justifiable and appropriate is defined. Furthermore, the

2 The definition of hubris is interdependent with the heuristic question of how to identify the subject of hubris in biblical texts. Several criteria can be indicative, even though there is often some room for interpretation. (1) Terminology: various Hebrew terms can express pride and hubris: the root גָּאָה »to be/become high, to rise up« and its nominal derivatives, often translated in the Septuagint with ὑβρις and its word family, and the semantically cognate root גָּבִיָּה, which is just as much part of the semantic field of height as גָּאָה and, less commonly, גָּדִיל. The semantics of height are often combined with body parts like the heart, the eyes, and, in one instance, the nose, in addition to references to the spirit (רוּחַ) rising up. Another root that can convey presumption and hubris is זָדָה and its derivatives. A significant concentration of these terms can be found in Jer 48:29. However, it should be acknowledged that some of these terms have multiple connotations. For a detailed discussion of the terminology related to pride and hubris in the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, cf. Georg Bertram, »Hochmut: und verwandte Begriffe im griechischen und hebräischen Alten Testament,« *WO* 3/1–2 (1964) 32–43. (2) A literary device of the indirect characterization of the protagonist involves placing words of pride, presumption, or overconfidence, expressed in the 1st person, in his or her mouth. The speech introductions of these »hubristic monologues« sometimes also employ terminology of hubris (see above). For further details on hubristic monologues, see Section 3 below. (3) What is less certain, however, is the possibility to draw conclusions about hubris solely from narrated or ascribed actions. In each instance, it is essential to carefully examine both the immediate and broader contexts to determine whether hubris can accurately be ascribed.

3 However, definitions of »hubris« found in encyclopedia articles often narrow the term to a religious-theological aspect, focusing on the striving to become divine or actively challenging the deity (cf., for instance, Wolf Krötke, »Hybris II. Religionsphilosophisch,« *RGG*³ 3 [2000] 1970). John T. Strong, »Sitting on the Seat of God: A Study of Pride and Hubris in the Prophetic Corpus of the Hebrew Bible,« *BR* 56 (2011) 55–81, fundamentally distinguishes between »pride«, which remains in the interpersonal sphere, and »hubris«, which »entails an encroachment into the realm of the divine« (ibid.: 55). However, such a restriction of the term »hubris« to the religious dimension neither aligns with the history of the Greek term ὑβρις (with primarily ethical and legal meaning; cf. Theodor Heinze and Gerhard Thür, »Hybris,« *DNP* 5 [1998] 771 f. et al.), nor can such a sharp distinction between »pride« and »hubris« be properly drawn in the Hebrew Bible.

construction of hubris in specific interpretations and from particular perspectives especially invites the use of humor and mockery. This leads us to a discussion of the term »humor«.

Defining humor precisely is challenging, and this article will not focus on discussions surrounding definitions of humor. For our current purposes, the following definition will suffice: *humor is what aims to make the audience laugh*.⁴ This makes humor a category of textual pragmatics, as it describes the intended effect on readers. It is also clear that humor, much like hubris, depends on the cultural conventions of a specific time. This raises the question of how humor can be identified in biblical texts and demands caution against detecting humor too quickly and too confidently.

The term »humor« becomes easier to handle and apply when different humorous techniques are distinguished. To refer back to the previously cited encyclopedia article, humor can be expressed through various means, such as »paronomasia, hyperbole, irony, sarcasm, parody, satire, ridicule, trickery, and turnabouts«⁵ (although these terms also require definitions; see Section 3 below for some of them). Overall, to elicit laughter, humor often employs elements of alienation, incongruence, and surprise by subverting the audience's expectations. This can manifest at the linguistic, rhetorical, or content level.

This paper focuses on a specific type of humor, namely mockery and ridicule, which targets other people, nations, or cities, provoking laughter *at their expense*. More specifically, it examines mockery directed against foreign empires and their rulers, as they often appear as subjects of hubris in biblical texts. However, these empires are not the real addressees of the texts; rather, they are aimed at a Judean target group. Thus, it is essential to distinguish between the author of the mockery, the addressed audience (the in-group encouraged to laugh), and the reference object that is mocked and intended to be laughed at. This triangle forms the communicative framework within which mockery occurs.

Mockery is closely connected to the polarity of honor and shame. It seeks to dishonor the object of mockery and enhance its shame in the eyes of the audience.⁶ Simultaneously, it bolsters the sense of honor within the in-group by reinforcing their sense of superiority and triumph over the object of mockery. The effectiveness of mockery increases with the contrast between the previous, aspired, or presumed

4 Similarly, Gaß describes laughter as »the involuntary response to humor« and »the medium through which humor is realized« (Gaß, »Humor and Wit«: 565). For a historical overview of the term »humor« in English and in German, see Erhard Schüttpeitz, »Humor,« *HWRh* 4 (1998) 86–98.

5 Gaß, »Humor and Wit«: 565.

6 Regarding the significance of the »public court of reputation« in the concept of honor and shame, see Zeba A. Crook, »Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited,« *JBL* 128/3 (2009) 591–611.

honor and the actual outcome. The greater the degree of loss of honor, the greater the resulting shame. This creates a link between the shame elicited by mockery and the theme of pride and downfall.

Moreover, the dynamic between humor and power is particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, humor can serve to reinforce existing power structures and prevailing ideologies by repressively mocking at deviations from the norm.⁷ On the other hand, humor can take on an emancipatory function by criticizing established norms and power dynamics, acting subversively against them. It thus represents a reaction to an opponent's claim to power and serves as a tool of resistance and critique of power »from below«.⁸ While the »humor of power« emphasizes the contrast between one's own power and the opponent's powerlessness, the rebellious and subversive humor of power critique highlights the contrast between the opponent's claim to power or former power and the reality of their situation or outcomes.

2 Humor in Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions

An example of the humor of power are the royal inscriptions of Neo-Assyrian kings. A few brief remarks on that will suffice here.⁹ Humor and mockery predominantly appear in reports of military campaigns in depictions of military opponents. Irene Madreiter identifies three techniques of humor:¹⁰

(1) *Pseudo-etymological wordplays* are employed to ridicule enemies.¹¹

(2) The technique of *metaphorical shift* creates surprise by combining two things that do not naturally belong or fit together, often through comparisons involving animals, and sometimes women, or through allegory. This technique ridicules the cowardice and weakness of the enemy while simultaneously celebrating and legitimizing the king's own power and superiority.

7 Cf. Eckart Frahm, »Humor in assyrischen Königsinschriften,« in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East: Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Prague, July 1–5, 1996*, ed. Jiří Prosecký (Prague: Oriental Institute, 1998) 147–162: 149 f.

8 Cf. Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: SAGE, 2005), 207–211: »[R]ebellious humour outwardly mocks the rules and the rulers« (*ibid.*, 207).

9 For further details on this topic, see the studies of Frahm, »Humor«: 147–162, and Irene Madreiter, »Den Feind verlachen: Die Funktionen von Humor und Spott in Kriegsberichten der assyrischen Herrscher,« in *Krieg in den Köpfen. Akten der Grazer Adventgespräche 2012*, ed. Peter Mauritsch, Nummi et Litterae 8 (Graz: Leykam, 2017), 41–63.

10 Madreiter, »Feind«: 45–53.

11 Cf. analogous wordplays in the Hebrew Bible, such as Gen 11:9; 19:36–37; 1Sam 25:25.

(3) The technique of *unexpected linking* also creates a surprising effect, often producing a punchline by breaking taboos or highlighting discrepancies between convention and reality. The humor lies in the incidents themselves, triggering *schadenfreude*. In this way, enemy kings are discredited by being humiliated in their dignity.

Overall, an essential function of humor in the royal inscriptions, according to Madreiter, is the reinforcement of one's own cultural and military superiority. Madreiter adopts the term »humour of power« coined by Michael Billig, which upholds the hegemony of the group in power.¹² In other words, humor is utilized by the ruler for specific purposes, such as maintaining personal power or propagandistically elevating his own state.¹³ Thus, humor supports the legitimacy of the Assyrian kings' rule.

In addition to Madreiter's insights, I would like to highlight another aspect that further enhances the level of humor. As previously mentioned, mockery often manifests through comparisons with animals, for example prey or fugitive animals. What makes these depictions even more ridiculous is the contrast with the characterization of the enemies before the battle: they are often portrayed as overconfident and hubristic, relying on their own strength, fortifications, or favorable topographical conditions.¹⁴ For instance, before the scribes of Sargon II liken the Babylonian king Marduk-apla-iddina to various animals – such as a bat, a cat, a mongoose, a captured eagle, or a pig – due to his military defeat,¹⁵ they first document his initial reliance on the sea and its waves:

Marduk-apla-iddina (II) (Merodach-Baladan), descendant of Yakin, king of Chaldea, a murderer (lit.: »seed of murder«) (and) the (very) image of a *gallû*-demon, who does not fear the word of the lord of lords (Marduk), put his trust in the sea (and its) surging waves, broke (lit.: »overturned«) the treaty (sworn) by the great gods, and withheld his audience gift. [...] At the command of the god Aššur, the father of the gods, and of the great lord, the god Marduk, I got my (chariot) teams ready (and) prepared my (military) camp. I ordered the march against the Chaldean, a dangerous enemy. However, that Marduk-apla-iddina heard of the approach of my expeditionary force. His own fear(s) then fell upon him and he flew away from Babylon to the city Iqbi-Bêl during the night like a bat. [...] Together with his allies (and) his battle troops, he pitched his royal tent in a bend of the river (lit.: »between the rivers«) like a *crane* and

12 Madreiter, »Feind«: 56; cf. Billig, *Laughter*, 170 f.; 202–207.

13 Madreiter, »Feind«: 56.

14 See, for instance, Jan Kreuch, *Unheil und Heil bei Jesaja. Studien zur Entstehung des Assur-Zyklus Jesaja 28–31*, WMANT 130 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2011), 318–320; R. Sofia Salo, »Assur als Werkzeug Gottes im Alten Testament,« in *Religion und Krieg*, ed. Manfred L. G. Dietrich et al., MARG 22 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2015) 61–83: 77–79, and CAD T, 66 s. v. takālu.

15 On the various animals that Marduk-apla-iddina is compared with in the royal inscriptions of Sargon II, see Frahm, »Humor«: 154; Madreiter, »Feind«: 49.

set up his (military) camp. I had my fighters fly [o]ver his canals and they brought about his defeat. [...] However, that (man) abandoned [his] royal tent, gold bed, gold throne, gold chair, gold scepter, gold chariot, gold parasol, and his neck ornament inside his (military) ca[m]p and fled off by himself; like a cat, he hugged the side of his (city's) wall and entered his city. I surrounded (and) conquered the city Dūr-Yakin. I rounded up that man, together with his wife, his sons, his daughters [...]. I burned his fortified city Dūr-Yakin down with fire.¹⁶

The overly self-confident king, who is also portrayed as dangerous and threatening, ultimately succumbs to panic and fear, becoming endangered and threatened himself. It is the contrast between this initial overconfidence and the subsequent weakness and helplessness that intensifies the ridicule through animal imagery.

3 Humor and Hubris in Biblical Prophetic Texts

In prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible that address foreign empires and rulers, several techniques of humor and mockery can be identified, although they differ from those used in the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions due to differences in genre. Below, I will present five literary and rhetorical devices that convey humor by mocking and caricaturing hubristic protagonists, each illustrated with some textual examples.¹⁷

(1) The protagonist's arrogant mindset is often illustrated through hubristic monologues.¹⁸ These are fictional quotations that interpret the protagonist's behavior from an outsider's perspective, framed by a dismissive comment. The fictional nature of these hubristic monologues is complemented by the fact that they often contain *caricaturing exaggerations*. This means that while the quotations may have a (limited) connection to reality, they simultaneously alienate and parody it.¹⁹ In

¹⁶ Inscription Sargon II 7:121–134 (edited in Grant Frame, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II, King of Assyria [721–705 BC]*, RINAP 2 [University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021], 148 f.).

¹⁷ Due to the focus of the article and space constraints, I will limit my discussion to oracles directed against political superpowers such as Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt, while also including the city-state of Tyre as an economic superpower. I will especially concentrate on texts that characterize the protagonists as hubristic. However, this does not imply that the literary devices discussed below are restricted to these oracles; they can also be found in oracles against nations like Edom or Moab, that are sometimes accused of hubris and overconfidence as well.

¹⁸ On hubristic monologues («Hoffartsmonologe») in the oracles against the nations, see Peter Höffken, *Untersuchungen zu den Begründungselementen der Völkerorakel des Alten Testaments* (Bonn: Ph.D. diss., 1977), 206–243.

¹⁹ The term «parody» encompasses (1) the imitative and simultaneously alienating intertextual reference to an original, (2) the comicization of the original produced through this alienation (often achieved through exaggeration), and (3) a satirical, i.e. critical and/or mocking function (for a defi-

Isa 10:13, Assyria boasts about its supposed qualities as the alleged cause of its military success: »For he says: »By the strength of my hand I have done (it), and by my wisdom, for I am intelligent.« This monologue has some resemblance to actual Neo-Assyrian propaganda found in the self-portrayals of kings in royal inscriptions; however, the typical attribution of strength and wisdom to the Assyrian gods²⁰ is omitted. As a result, the boastful propaganda comes across as an expression of hubris and blasphemy, thereby serving as a parody.²¹ Instances of self-deification among foreign kings also fall into the category of caricaturing exaggerations. For example, according to Ezek 28:2, the king of Tyre believes himself to be divine:

Because your heart is proud and you have said, »I am a god (אל אני); I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas (מושב אלהים ישבתי בלב ימים) – yet you are but a human, and no god (אל) [...] – and because you made your heart like the heart of a god (כלב אלהים) [...].

However, there is no substantive evidence that the historical kings of the Phoenician city-states actually viewed themselves as divine.²² Moreover, neither Sargon II nor any other ancient Near Eastern ruler is likely to have spoken as ambitiously as the anonymous king in Isa 14:13–14:²³ »You said in your heart, »I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God (אל); I will sit on the mount of assembly (הר מועד) on the heights of Zaphon (ירכתי צפון); I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High (אדמה לעליון).« The caricaturing, alienating, and parodic exaggerations render the protagonist's attitude absurd and ridiculous.

nition of the term, see Peter Stocker, »Parodie,« *HWRh* 6 [2003] 637–649: 637–642). The term is thus well suited to describe what occurs in some hubristic monologues.

²⁰ Cf. Salo, »Assur«: 78 f.

²¹ For the interpretation of the hubristic monologue as a parody of Neo-Assyrian propaganda, see also Göran Eidevall, »Propagandistic Constructions of Empires in the Book of Isaiah,« in *Divination, Politics, and Ancient Near Eastern Empires*, ed. Alan Lenzi and Jonathan Stökl, ANEM 7 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press 2014) 109–128: 116.

²² Cf. R. Sofia Salo, *Die jüdische Königsideologie im Kontext der Nachbarkulturen: Untersuchungen zu den Königspsalmen 2, 18, 20, 21, 45 und 72*, ORA 25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 174 f.; 193. On the divinity of the king in ancient Near Eastern royal ideologies, see *ibid.*, 173–194. Statements resembling Ezek 28:2 are rare and are typically from older periods.

²³ According to a widespread research opinion, the mocking poem in Isa 14:4–21 originally referenced Sargon II (cf. Hermann Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josia-Zeit: Israel und Assur als Thema einer produktiven Neuinterpretation der Jesajaüberlieferung*, WMANT 48 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977], 135–140; Shawn Z. Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology*, ANEM 19 [Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017], 240–244 et al.), although the final text introduces the (anonymous) Babylonian king as its reference object (v. 4).

(2) Another rhetorical device is the use of *irony*. Irony involves a deliberate incongruence and dynamic tension between what is said and what is meant, between the text and its subtext.²⁴ It can be expressed, for instance, through questions, requests, or statements. Ironical, i.e. rhetorical questions only appear to serve to obtain information; in certain cases, they aim to mock and expose the addressed individual due to the anticipated negative response. For example, the self-deifying Tyrian ruler is mockingly asked: »Will you still say before your murderers: ›I am a god‹?« (Ezek 28:9); and Pharaoh is confronted with the disillusioning question: »Where are your sages (אִים אֲפואַ חכמִיד)?« (Isa 19:12).²⁵ The latter question is followed by an ironic request, the unsatisfiability of which is readily apparent to the speaker: »Let them tell you and let (you) know (וַיִּגִּדוּ נָא לָךְ וַיִּדְעוּ) what YHWH of hosts has planned about Egypt!« (Isa 19:12). Similarly, Isa 47:12–13, addressed to personified Babylon, proclaims: »Stand fast (עֲמִדִי נָא) with your (binding) magic and the multitude of your witchcraft! [...] Let them stand and save you who divide (?) the heavens [...]!«. These last two requests are paired with ironic statements that only appear to be intended to inspire hope: »Perhaps (אֻלֵּי) you can help, perhaps (אֻלֵּי) you can cause terror« (Isa 47:12). The easily detectable irony generates a feeling of superiority among readers compared to the mocked subjects: it »functions to create a community of superior knowledge between the author and the reader«.²⁶

(3) A more subtle form of irony is found in the *alienation of genres*, where genres and literary or rhetorical forms are adopted, while also being modified and recontextualized. This creates incongruence between the conventional form and function of a genre and its application. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the forms and genres of lament, which are frequently found in prophetic texts.²⁷ Isa 10:5–15* is a prophetically alienated word of woe (introduced by הוֹי אַשּׁוּר »woe, Assyria«), with which YHWH unexpectedly laments Assyria's downfall in a proleptic manner and deliberately modifies stylistic forms, such as the contrast motif and the praise of the dead, within the context of a dirge. Such ironic words of woe are also present in oracles against Nineveh (Nah 3:1: הוֹי עִיר דַּמִּים »woe, bloody city!«) and Babylon (Jer 50:27: הוֹי עַלֵיהֶם »woe to them!«; Hab 2:6–20*). Furthermore, forms

24 For definitions and descriptions of the phenomenon of irony, see Cornelis Bennema, »Irony I. Introduction,« *EBR* 13 (2016) 250 f.; Matthew Pawlak, »Verbal Irony in Translation: LXX Amos 4:4–5, Isaiah 47:12–13, Ezekiel 28:3–5,« *ZAW* 134/4 (2022) 500–514: 500 f. (with references to further literature), and, more extensively, Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, ISBL (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

25 Another rhetorical question introduced with אִיה »where« is found in Nah 2:12: »Where (אִיה) is the dwelling of the lion and the cave of the young lions, where the lion goes (and) the lion's cubs, and no one disturbs them?«.

26 Bennema, »Irony«: 251.

27 Cf. also Billig, *Laughter*, 207: »[H]umour can be found in breaking the codes of language.«

of lament are incorporated in Isa 47* and adapted for prophetic purposes: the text can be classified as a modified city lament²⁸ and as such is a linguistic pre-staging of Babylon's downfall, which lends the lamenting elements an ironic character. Characteristics of the dirge genre are clearly identifiable in Isa 14:4–23* (especially vv. 12–15), where elements of lamentation are modified in such a way that a text resembling a dirge transforms into a song of mockery and schadenfreude.²⁹ The lamenting exclamation אֵיךְ »how ...!«, introducing the entire text in v. 4 as well as the subsection vv. 12–15, is additionally found in Jer 50:23; 51:41 in the oracle against Babylon. Furthermore, imperative calls to lament (הִילֵלוּ »wail!«) are used in Isa 13:6; Jer 51:8, and Ezek 30:2.

(4) In terms of content, several texts portray foreign political powers and their downfalls in the form of the *grotesque*.³⁰ The grotesque can be briefly described as a monstrous or repulsive literary or artistic depiction that employs alienation with a comical and mocking intention, simultaneously evoking horror or disgust and amusement.³¹ Therefore, it can be added to the subcategories of humor presented earlier (see Section 1). In prophetic oracles against (former) imperial powers, at least two motifs can be categorized as grotesque. The first one is the motif of nakedness: both Nineveh (Nah 3:5–6) and Babylon (Isa 47:3) are personified as women whose nakedness is publicly exposed, implying a profound shame. The wording of the latter passage may even suggest exposure to sexual assault.³² The second motif is drunkenness: Nineveh (Nah 3:11), the social elite of Babylon (Jer 51:57), and

28 Cf. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, BibOr 44 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 109–113; Randall Heskett, *Reading the Book of Isaiah: Destruction and Lament in the Holy Cities* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 86–100. The background of the city lament genre is indicated by the personification of the city as a woman and its reference as »virgin daughter Babylon« and »daughter Chaldaea«, along with imperative calls for mourning and self-mitigation rites, the contrast motif, quotations of Babylon's own words, the motifs of widowhood and loss of children, and the partial qinah meter.

29 Cf. Gale A. Yee, »The Anatomy of Biblical Parody: The Dirge Form in 2 Samuel 1 and Isaiah 14,« *CBQ* 50/4 (1988) 565–586.

30 The inclusion of this category here is inspired by a conference paper of Sara Järlemyr (Lund), who also addresses this issue in her forthcoming dissertation and applies it to some of the prophetic topics (nakedness, drunkenness) and texts mentioned below, although she examines them in the context of masculinity and vulnerability (working title: »Worthless Men: Vulnerable Warriors in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond«).

31 For discussions of the term and history of the grotesque, see Geoffrey G. Harpham, »The Grotesque: First Principles,« *JAAC* 34/4 (1976) 461–468; idem, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 182); Ulrich Weisstein, »Groteske,« *HWRh* 3 (1996) 637–649.

32 Thus Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AncB 19A (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 280 et al.

Egypt (Isa 19:14) are depicted as intoxicated (שכ"ר). In such a state, they behave in a completely disoriented and irrational manner. Especially the vivid and illustrative comparison with a vomiting person in Isa 19:14 arouses disgust.

(5) A final stylistic device for criticizing hubris is the strong use of *mythical elements*. Ezek 31 employs the mythical motif of the cosmic tree,³³ which stands out from all other trees due to its height and beauty and has cosmic significance, yet is ultimately felled because of its hubris. Moreover, mythical locations play an important role: several texts literarily situate the protagonist of hubris in a supernatural place within the divine realm that is inaccessible to ordinary mortals, either as a desired location or as an actual abode. One such place is the mountain of God (or the gods): while the anonymous king in Isa 14:13–14 aspires to be enthroned on the »mountain of assembly« (הר מועד) and the »heights of Zaphon« (ירכתי צפון) with presumptuous intentions, striving upward into the heavenly sphere of stars and clouds, the king in Ezek 28:14,16 is already situated on the »(holy) mountain of God/the gods« (הר [קדש] אלהים). At the same time, he resides in »Eden, the garden of God/the gods« (עֵדֶן גֶּן אֱלֹהִים, Ezek 28:13), which merely illustrates other aspects of the same mythical realm in which he finds himself. Unlike the king in Isa 14, this king does not seek divinity; rather, he already participates in the divine, and solely due to his hubris he loses all these privileges (Ezek 28:16–18*). The garden of Eden as a mythical place also features prominently in Ezek 31, another text addressing hubris (vv. 9,16,18). In Ezek 28:2, the king of Tyre more unspecifically locates himself »in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas« (מושב אלהים ישבתי בלב ימים, see above), referencing the island location of Tyre and the resulting impregnability of the city but also carrying mythical implications due to the ruler's claim to divinity.³⁴ The opposite place to the divine realm is the underworld: rather than ascending to heaven, the king of Isa 14 is cast down into the underworld (v. 15 et al.); the »heart of the sea« does not become a dwelling place of the gods for the king of Tyre but instead becomes a gateway to the underworld (Ezek 28:8); and the cosmic cedar loses its heavenly height to join the »trees of Eden« in the underworld (Ezek 31:14–18).³⁵ The mythical exaltation of hubristic subjects and its rever-

³³ On the cosmic tree, see Susanne Müller Trufaut, »Weltenbaum,« *Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* (2007; <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/34732/> [2024-10-12]).

³⁴ According to Judean mythology, control of the sea belongs solely to YHWH (cf., for instance, Ps 29:10 and Carly L. Crouch, »Ezekiel's Oracles against the Nations in Light of a Royal Ideology of Warfare,« *JBL* 130/3 [2011] 473–492: 486), which makes the claim of the king of Tyre presumptuous in relation to the Judean deity.

³⁵ Regarding the descents to the netherworld in these three texts, see Marcel Krusche, »The Descent to the Netherworld as a Result of Hubris in the Biblical Prophetic Literature,« *VT* 74/1 (2024) 101–114.

sal through the motif of descent into the underworld serve to further increase the altitude of the downfall and illustrate the contrast between claim and reality or outcome. The protagonist's claim to divinity is ironically taken up and caricatured. Thus, the mythical coloring and the mocking rhetoric of the texts are intertwined, each serving to render absurd the hubris of those who aspire to superhuman and divine status.³⁶

4 Isaiah 37:22: The Mocking Daughter Zion

Finally, one passage deserves closer examination because it is particularly interesting in relation to mockery and hubris. In Isa 37:21–29, a passage that is also found in 2Kgs 18:20–28,³⁷ the prophet Isaiah conveys a divine message to King Hezekiah, which includes a speech of rebuke and judgment directed against the Assyrian king Sennacherib. This message accuses Sennacherib of hubris, particularly highlighted by his pursuit of height (וַתִּשָּׂא מְרוֹם עֵינֶיךָ »you have haughtily lifted up your eyes«, v. 23) and a larger hubristic monologue (vv. 24–25), in which Sennacherib boasts of his universal power by claiming to have felled the cedars of Lebanon and dried up all streams of Egypt. The semantic field of height is notably prominent, which is typical for descriptions of hubris. Sennacherib's hubris also carries a religious dimension, as it directly challenges YHWH, the »Holy One of Israel« (v. 23). In this context, the semantic field of shame is introduced with the verbs חָרַךְ (twice) and גָּדַף, both of which imply shaming and blasphemy against YHWH.

This hubris and blasphemy, however, is countered by Zion, personified as a female figure referred to as בַּת צִיּוֹן »virgin daughter Zion« and בַּת יְרוּשָׁלַם »daughter Jerusalem« (v. 22). She responds with a negative inner attitude toward Sennacherib (בִּזְיָה »to despise«), with words of scorn (לֵעָג »to mock, to deride«), and with a gesture of disdain by shaking her head.³⁸ Two noteworthy aspects

³⁶ Cf. Krusche, »Descent«: 110–112.

³⁷ It would go too far to delve into diachronic questions about the origins and relationship of the two parallel texts here. In my opinion, Isa 36–37* par. 2Kgs 18,17–19,37* represents an originally independent composition that was only later incorporated both into the book of Isaiah and 2 Kings, though it is deeply rooted in the Isaiah tradition. The passage Isa 37:21–29 is part of a later addition to Isa 36–37*, which may, however, date back to the 7th century BCE, potentially being even older than its current narrative context. See also the results and theses in Lida L. Panov, *Hiskijas Geschick und Jesajas Beistand: Heilstheologische Verarbeitungen der Jesajaüberlieferung in den Hiskija-Jesaja-Erzählungen*, ATANT 110 (Zürich: TVZ, 2019), 245 f.; 250 f.; 254 f.

³⁸ On the gesture of shaking one's head as a sign of disdain and mockery, see Jer 18:16; Ps 22:8 (|| לֵעָג); 44:15 (|| שִׁיִּים מִשָּׁל); 109:25 (|| חֲרָפָה); Job 16:4; Lam 2:15. It is noteworthy that in Lam 2:15, the devastated »daughter Jerusalem« is the addressee of this gesture, performed by those passing

emerge from this passage: first, the mockery is not only articulated (both verbally and non-verbally), but the speech act of mockery is even explicitly named by the verb לִצְחֹק.³⁹ Secondly, YHWH, who is the target of the blasphemy, does not implement the mockery of Sennacherib by himself; instead, he introduces a third party, namely daughter Zion, as the agent of mockery. This raises the question: why daughter Zion?

The question of the function and effect of introducing personified Jerusalem in this passage has rarely been addressed in research literature, and those who have engaged with the mention of daughter Zion have come to quite different conclusions. Marc Wischnowsky, in his monograph on daughter Zion, mentions this passage only in a footnote, as he perceives it as a weak echo of personification⁴⁰ – an assessment that is difficult to reconcile with the evidently quite active role of daughter Zion. Christl M. Maier emphasizes the self-confident image of daughter Zion, highlighting her trust in divine protection.⁴¹ According to Willem A. M. Beuken,⁴² and subsequently Lida L. Panov,⁴³ daughter Zion occupies a prophetic role by expressing YHWH's rejection of Sennacherib. However, none of these interpretations adequately consider the function and effect of daughter Zion as the *subject of mockery*.

The origins of the female personification of Zion lie in the city lament in the context of prophecies of doom.⁴⁴ Daughter Zion appears as a vulnerable figure. In my view, the aspect of vulnerability is also in the background of Isa 37:22. Zion is portrayed as a potential victim of Sennacherib's campaign. As previously noted, Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions often feminize the enemies of war. In biblical prophetic texts, military attacks on cities or countries could even be depicted as sexual

by, whereas in Isa 37:22, personified Jerusalem herself shakes her head triumphantly. Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 11 (New York: Doubleday, 1988): 237, however, interpret the shaking of the head not just as a gesture of mockery but also as one of »sorrow and commiseration«, identifying »[n]o small amount of irony« here, »as the prophet depicts the attacked consoling the attacker, and this by saying, ›Poor Assyria, how you do suffer!‹« Even if this interpretation holds true, the ironic use of the gesture further intensifies the element of mockery.

³⁹ Regarding this verb and its semantics of mockery, cf. Hermann Barth, לִצְחֹק lā'ag etc., *TDOT* 8 (2007) 10–14.

⁴⁰ Marc Wischnowsky, *Tochter Zion. Aufnahme und Überwindung der Stadtklage in den Prophetenschriften des Alten Testaments*, WMANT 89 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001), 80, n. 80.

⁴¹ Christl M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion. Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 80 f.

⁴² Willem A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27*, HThKAT (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2007), 397–402.

⁴³ Panov, *Geschick*, 115 f.

⁴⁴ Cf. Wischnowsky, *Tochter Zion*, 266–268.

assaults, with conquests metaphorically presented as rape.⁴⁵ As Christl Maier has observed, the title בתולה for daughter Zion in relation to the Assyrian ruler's threat to take the city carries sexual connotations.⁴⁶ Although the term does not necessarily denote virginity in the first place, a woman described as בתולה «is marked both sexually desirable and available».⁴⁷ In some contexts, a בתולה is even associated with sexual violence.⁴⁸ Thus, daughter Zion enters the scene as a potential victim of rape.⁴⁹ However, due to divine protection, this act is not carried out. Consequently, the vulnerable daughter Zion triumphs over the Assyrian king and mocks him. Through the feminine imagery, the Assyrian method of mocking enemies from a position of power is both taken up and countered by reversal. The power dynamics between the two figures are also reversed: the seemingly weak and powerless daughter Zion triumphs over the ostensibly powerful king. This further intensifies Sennacherib's shame⁵⁰ and amplifies the contrast between his hubris and his downfall. By making virgin daughter Zion the agent of mockery, the effect of this ridicule is magnified. Thus, daughter Zion emerges as the personified embodiment

45 Cf. Pamela Gordon and Harold Washington, »Rape as a Military Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible,« in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. 'Atalyah Brenner-Iydan, FCB 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press, 1995) 308–325.

46 Maier, *Daughter Zion*, 81; similarly, Phil J. Botha, »Isaiah 37:21–35: Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem as a challenge to the honour of Yahweh,« *OTE* 13/3 (2000) 269–282: 275; 279. Other references where the term בתולה is connected with (the idea of) sexual intercourse include Gen 24:16; Exod 22:15; Deut 22:19,23,28; Judg 19:24; 21:12; 1Kgs 1:2–4; Isa 23:12; Lam 5:11.

47 Gordon and Washington, »Rape«: 319.

48 Deut 22:28–29 (עַיִרָה תַּפֹּשׁ piel); Judg 19:24 (עַיִרָה piel); 2Sam 13:12 (עַיִרָה piel); Isa 23:12 (עַשְׂקָה pual); Lam 5:11 (עַיִרָה piel).

49 The application of the term »rape« to biblical texts is controversial among scholars (for discussion, see most recently Barbara Thiede, »Taking Biblical Authors at Their Word: On Scholarly Ethics, Sexual Violence, and Rape Culture in the Hebrew Bible,« *JBL* 143/2 [2024] 185–205, advocating for the use of the terms »rape« and »rape culture« from a modern perspective). But even from an emic viewpoint, I argue that the Hebrew Bible does contain concepts of rape and sexual violence, albeit differing from contemporary concepts as they are shaped by an androcentric perspective and influenced by male interests. Nonetheless, a sexual act may be labeled »rape« even within a biblical framework if (1) it involves physical violence and (2) is committed against a person who is not one's own wife. It is viewed as an act of violence particularly due to its negative social implications for the victim. For more on sexual violence and its social consequences for women in the Hebrew Bible see Ilse Müllner, »Sexuelle Gewalt im Alten Testament,« in *Sexuelle Gewalt gegen Mädchen und Frauen als Thema der feministischen Theologie*, ed. Ulrike Eichler and Ilse Müllner (Gütersloh: Kaiser Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999) 40–75.

50 On honor and shame in Isa 37, cf. also Botha, »Isaiah 37«: 269–282. For a discussion on the potentially profound impact of dishonoring and shaming »from below,« that is, from people with a lower social status, and the serious threat this poses to honor, see Crook, »Honor«: 599–604 (with examples from Roman antiquity and the Gospels).

of the humor of power critique, while Sennacherib is portrayed as the epitome of imperial hubris.

5 Conclusion

Overall, it is significant that numerous texts addressing hubris are infused with forms of mockery, irony, parody and alienation. The connection between these rhetorical devices and hubris is not coincidental: hubris is inherently linked to the pursuit of fame and honor, driven by a desire to elevate one's own status. This ambition simultaneously heightens the potential for downfall and amplifies the degree of loss of honor. The rhetorical and literary stylistic forms described above ridicule, dishonor, and expose the arrogant, stripping them of their presumed dignity, and aiming for a linguistic deconstruction of hubris. Conversely, one can also view this from the opposite perspective: the texts create a portrayal of hubris and overconfidence for the objects of mockery to enhance the contrast and render them more suitable and exposable for ridicule. They typically create a contrast between high and low, aspiration and outcome, combined with the reversal of the former status of the hubristic protagonist.

In the context of humor and mockery, the power relations must also be considered. The crucial question is: who mocks whom, and for what purpose? While mockery in Assyrian royal inscriptions serves to legitimize the ruler's superiority (humor of power), mockery in biblical prophetic texts functions as a strategy to challenge and resist imperial power from the position of relative powerlessness. Imperial power is interpreted and constructed as an expression of hubris and is as such subversively parodied.

Abstract: In prophetic texts, humor is frequently employed to mock the hubris of imperial powers and rulers. This article describes various forms and stylistic devices of mockery such as caricaturing exaggerations, irony, alienation of genres, the grotesque, and mythical coloring, thereby working out the subversive function of »humor from below«. This type of humor serves to critique power and to expose and shame the (once) powerful. In 2Kgs 19:21 par. Isa 37:22, this mockery of imperial hubris is even personally embodied by daughter Zion.

Keywords: mockery; parody; irony; critique of power; honor and shame

Zusammenfassung: In prophetischen Texten wird häufig Humor zur Verspottung der Hybris imperialer Mächte und Machthaber eingesetzt. Dieser Artikel beschreibt verschiedene Arten und Stilmittel des Spottes wie karikierende Übertreibungen,

Ironie, Gattungsverfremdungen, Groteskes und mythisches Kolorit und arbeitet die subversive Funktion des »Humors von unten« heraus: Er dient der Machtkritik und der Bloßstellung und Beschämung der (einst) Mächtigen. In II Reg 19,21 par. Jes 37,22 wird dieser Spott gegen imperiale Hybris durch die Tochter Zion sogar personal verkörpert.

Schlagwörter: Spott; Parodie; Ironie; Machtkritik; Ehre und Schande

Résumé: Dans les textes prophétiques, l'humour est souvent utilisé pour moquer l'hubris des puissances et des dirigeants impériaux. Cet article décrit différents types et moyens stylistiques de la moquerie, tels que l'exagération caricaturale, l'ironie, le détournement de genres, le grotesque et la coloration mythique, et met en lumière la fonction subversive de l'« humour d'en bas » : il sert à critiquer le pouvoir et à ridiculiser et embarrasser les (anciens) puissants. En 2 R 19,21 par. Es 37,22, cette moquerie contre l'hubris impériale est incarnée personnellement par la fille de Sion.

Mots-clés: moquerie; parodie; ironie; critique du pouvoir; honneur et honte